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**B BLACKNECKED STORK (XENORHYNCHUS ASIATICUS)
AND THE MARRIAGE OF MIRSHIKARS.**

By

B. Robert Grubh & P.B. Shekar.

Mirshikars are a group of Muslims (see Newsletter Nov.'67: "A Week in Bharatpur" by S.F.) found in various parts of Bihar, whose occupation has been trapping birds since several generations. The abundance of birdlife, especially waterbirds, and the lack of proper enforcement of the Wildlife Rules in Bihar enabled the Mirshikars and certain others to make bird catching the occupation of their caste. Here we shall see how Loha Sarang the Blacknecked Stork had been associated with the social life of Mirshikars.

If a Mirshikar youth wanted to marry a girl, besides fulfilling all other conditions and formalities, he would have to catch an adult Blacknecked Stork, alive, single-handed and unarmed, but for his glue-and-rod device. Here let us digress a little to discuss how this device works. Several canes of about an inch in diameter and ten feet length are fittled one on top, thus making a single rod of considerable length which gradually tapers towards one end. At that end a slightly upturned and trifurcated stick is fixed, on which a kind of strong glue is applied. The man holds the other end of the rod and manoeuvres it with amazing skill towards birds sitting quite far away, on the ground. The bird would not fly away because the man is at a 'safe' distance. The bird would not know that the stick, approaching it steadily, is 'remote-controlled'. When the tip of the rod reaches the right distance the hunter gives a quick forward jerk to the rod and the glued stick fastens itself well into the feathers of the victim. The bird cannot free itself from the stick, be it a sparrow or a bird of the size of a vulture. This method is used for birds even today, and we have witnessed it.

Now let us go back to the story. On the day of marriage the bridegroom starts from his house with a party comprising of his people and those of the bride, and marches towards the place where the Loha Sarang is known to be present. The procession stops as soon as the bird is located. The bridegroom goes alone to get the bird. We may wonder why so much fuss is made for catching just a bird. However, the Blacknecked Stork is shockingly ferocious when cornered. The bird stands on its knees with partly open wings, facing the enemy and waits for a chance to plunge its bill, which is like a dagger, into

its opponent. As it is a tall and huge bird with long and agile neck, it is not very easy to catch it bare-handed.

If the bridegroom was successful in catching the bird the procession would move with him on to the bride's house and the marriage would take place. If he could not succeed on that day, the marriage would be postponed. When he finally manages to catch the bird, perhaps after several attempts, the marriage date would be fixed and the wedding would be solemnized. As it was prevalent among Muslims, they could marry more than one girl, if they desired so. But the hunting of the stork would have to be repeated each time.

This custom was stopped some forty years ago, following a tragic incident. A bridegroom set out with the people to catch the Blacknecked Stork for his marriage. He managed to fix the bird with the glue, and approached it. When he tried to catch it the worst thing happened - perhaps because of some miscalculation on his part. The bird gored his side fatally, and he died on the spot.

The above episode is true to the best of our knowledge. We got these facts from the Mirshikars and others who live in their neighbourhood.

BIRDWATCHERS' FIELD CLUB OUTING

By

Shama Futehally

On Sunday 19th February, the Club met, not as it usually does at Tulsi, but at Andheri: breakfast at our house, and then a walk through the 'meadows' behind the house to Juhu. Although the area is being rapidly built up, on this trip we saw enough that was new and interesting to make it a memorable walk.

First, Rosy Pastors: two or three of them feeding off a blossoming silk cotton tree. We got a very good view of these, they did not fly off for a long time. Then there were the wagtails, a couple of white wagtails, and some Eastern Grey. There were plenty of European swallows. On the side of the road we were following, I saw one or two Tree Pipits, merging beautifully with the background and a group of five or six Ring Plovers were startled into flight. There were many flocks of ordinary sparrows but one of them proved to consist in part of Brown Munias as well, established on barbed wire fences, taking off frequently to indulge in a short circular flight, returning to the identical spot again and again. Another discovery was one rather unusual bird, the Desert Wheatear. As far as I remember, this was perched on a stone wall and then on a boulder. There were two of them, some distance from each other. A thrilling new species, and if we had seen nothing else, they would have made the day.

Another lovely bird we saw was the Collared Bush Chat on a fence, one single male with a bright rose-orange breast, black head and back, and white patches on the neck. We had a long and excellent view of this bird rummaging among the dust for food.

Later we settled round a creek with a few small islets, reputed to be covered over completely with migrant birds sometimes; but now had only a few stray Sandpipers, one Spotted; one Little Egret, and a couple of Common Kingfishers. Then we walked along beside the creek on a dirt track; thick mangrove vegetation at the side and there were Blyth's Reed Warblers by the dozen in the bushes. Incidentally, there was a train of camel-wallahs coming along and I had a jerky ride along the road. Once we were arrested by a loud and harsh chuk-chuk from the mangrove, punctuated by scuffling and the sound of creaking twigs. Dr. Salim Ali identified this as a large Reed Warbler, uncommon in the area. But the bird, did not respond to our various eager claps and hisses, and remained high